

INSCRUTABLE SURFACING

“Hello? Is anybody out there?”

Enrobed in a black acoustic sound blanket, artist Baseera Khan sits on the floor of a performance space surrounded by audience members in folding chairs. The audience cannot see the artist’s body except for what might be glimpsed through a circular cutout in the fabric, embroidered with a sunburst design in gold thread. Khan’s voice comes through surrounding speakers as they address the audience through a microphone. “Could someone with a red shirt approach me, please?” When an audience member responds, Khan asks them to remove their shoes, and the artist slowly extends a bare arm out of the cutout to retrieve one shoe at a time. Into the microphone, they

comment on the shoes, trying one on before dedicating a song and dance to the audience participant. Throughout the performance, Khan switches between singing, dancing, conversing, directing, and sitting silently, all while under the blanket.¹ At times, Khan invites physical contact, for instance, extending their arm out of the hole and saying, “You can kiss my hand. I don’t make you nervous, do I?” At other times, the artist sits alone in the middle of the space and asserts, “I don’t want to talk to anyone. I’m not in a good mood. I feel isolated sometimes,” before leading into their next pop song.

In iterations of their performance *Acoustic Sound Blankets*, Baseera Khan experiments with the bounds of sociality as contoured by the titular textiles.² Khan’s performance under the sound blanket remixes tropes of Muslim, South Asian, and brown femme inscrutability that figure through visual cover and anxiety over women and femmes’ capacity to voice. Through bossy, playful, and sullen interactions with the audience, Khan reminds us that their vision, too, is blocked, and their hearing is muffled from within the sound blanket. Yet what could be narrated as hindrances to sociality and creativity are instead the grounds upon which Khan constructs the performance.

Surface Relations: Queer Forms of Asian American Inscrutability considers minoritarian aesthetic and affective modes of inscrutability that negotiate formal legibility with sociopolitical viability. This book studies Asian American expressive cultures of surface, such as Khan’s use of sound blankets, that invite the reader to the queer relational practices of inscrutability that are all too often invisibilized or written off as apathetic or apolitical. Khan’s performance of inscrutability does not foreclose interaction but creates modes, space, and time through which to be together. Asian American, transnational, and diasporic writers and artists have reanimated and reconfigured inscrutability to strategically perform Asiatic difference as something that disturbs social conventions and shares alternative ways of being in time, space, and body. These performances of inscrutability are vital acts of world-making in a cultural landscape that has normalized the nonappearance of Asian American culture.

Historically, inscrutability has been employed as a powerful Orientalist discourse through which a masculinized Euro-American subjectivity emerges, producing the centrality of the Western knower who names the racial, gender, religious, and/or national other as “impenetrable or unfathomable to investigation; quite unintelligible, entirely mysterious.”³ The particulars of the Orientalized person, place, and/or thing are often flattened, homogenized, and objectified in the process, appearing as a surface that can or cannot be penetrated. When further considered, however, the casting of the Asian as “inscrutable other” also suggests a racialization wherein the other knows



FIGURE 1.1. Baseera Khan, *Acoustic Sound Blankets*. Whitney Museum of American Art, July 21, 2017. Photograph by Filip Wolak.

something that cannot be accessed from without. To come into being as an inscrutable other is to have claim to modes of doing, knowing, and being that are inaccessible from an outside perspective. To claim inscrutability from an Asian diasporic positionality, then, is to protect a creative space and time in which minoritized lifeworlds may exist for their own audience.

The surface performance of inscrutability gives form to the fleeting, fluid qualities of Asian American sociality that do not appear under neoliberal optics. If legibility and meaning making are contingent on the repetition of conventions, then Asian American populations are often at a loss. Public convention erases Asian American history such that Asian American life is not believed to possess a legitimate culture. At the same time, Asian American communities face the generational grief, rage, and trauma of war, immigration, and exile, which disrupt the internal continuation of conventions as practiced through shared language, nationality, class, and, indeed, race. Forms of feminist, queer, trans, and Asian diasporic world-making are even more obscured for their deviation from inherited conventions of care and kinship. To theorize inscrutable relations through surface aesthetics, then,

is to give time and space to these forms of being and becoming that elude—whether strategically or compulsorily—official narration.

Surface Relations explores aesthetic modes of inscrutability through queer racial forms of invisibility, silence, impenetrability, flatness/flexibility, distance, and withholding. Often these aesthetic modes overlap and amplify one another. These minoritarian modes are sensible through queer-of-color aesthetics that necessarily navigate and elude typical perception. Performing inscrutably is a minor racial performative that signals social epistemologies other than white nationalist frameworks that narrate Asian American life as white aspiration or nonexistence.⁴ *Surface Relations* centers the work of contemporary art practitioners of Asian descent based in North American settled colonies, and theorizes inscrutable aesthetics through critical feminist, queer, and trans frameworks to expand possibilities for reading, feeling, and desiring beyond nationalist cis-heteronormative epistemic grids.

The common dismissal of Asian American, queer, and trans cultural life requires a confrontation with the xenophobia against esoteric knowledge. This book's meditations on inscrutability are intended not to alienate but rather to invite the reader to reconsider the racialization of engagement. Through performance analysis, I shift focus away from individual enlightenment and toward relational, contingent world-making with the contention that these inscrutable aesthetic modes vitalize social forms that stagnant models of subjectivity and community desperately need.

Inscrutability asks after the gender and sexual valences of Asian relationality, and the racial aesthetics of queer form. Asian and queer formations are entangled, not collapsible, and these entanglements warrant further thought in both ethnic studies and queer studies. "Asian American" and "queer" emerged as political hails through coalitional activism of the sixties, seventies, and eighties. Yet under neoliberal capitalism, both terms have hardened into identities interpreted as model minorities, a white supremacist discourse that drains the terms of their revolutionary politics. To be Asian American or queer is often to be narrated toward white-adjacent, wealthy, coupled assimilation, as exemplified by model minority discourse or marriage equality progress narratives. To feel Asian American and queer can render one illegible to dominant epistemes of straight/gay, masculine/feminine, white/Black, citizen/foreigner, settler/Indigenous binaries. These racialized feelings of illegibility weigh heavily on psychic health and are symptomatic of racial violence. To survive, again and again, the reiterative racial erasure of Asian American becoming is to develop a supple creative response to forms and knowledges that slip out of identitarian legibility. Affective and aesthetic attunement to

inscrutability equips us with tools to question the assimilationist narrative for queers and Asians in the United States, and to attend to non-identitarian practices of minoritarian world building.

Readers may hesitate to energize the xenophobic discourse of the inscrutable other, as Asian American cultural life remains underrepresented in major institutions of power. An incorporative impulse might dismiss a historic association between Asianness and inscrutability, and advocate for improved representation as a justified prerequisite for public care and claims to humanity. But what, and who, is further excluded in this wish for legibility? How might these flickering forms of the illegible occasion other modes of relating, attuning us to nuanced social practices not premised on racial, gender, and sexual fixity? Allowing for the legitimacy of political claims to public life, this book theorizes inscrutability as an intervention into liberal narratives of racial and sexual progress through assimilation.

Recognition and inclusion have not been freely granted to Asian Americans or queers, and histories of institutional exclusion have necessitated queer racial forms and affects for the survival of Asian American culture. This book reframes inscrutability as a dynamic anti-racist, feminist, and queer aesthetic through which Asian American life might become otherwise sensible and tenable in contemporary culture—not necessarily for majoritarian recognition but for minoritarian life and creativity. Chapter by chapter, *Surface Relations* analyzes Asian American culture through a queered lens of inscrutability by lingering in common criticisms of Asian American life as invisible, silent, impenetrable, flat, distant, and withholding. Rather than refute these judgments, this book lingers in the negative space that these stereotypes mold to see what has grown there and in this way makes a space for Asian American queer life.

Historical Productions of the (Queer) Inscrutable Asiatic

When I write of inscrutable surface, I point to the ways in which aesthetic judgments of spectacular exteriority and inaccessible interiority have produced conventions of Asian form premised on queer illegibility. The unknowability of what is behind the unspeaking surface, of what cannot be found out from an outside perspective, has occasioned deep anxiety and suspicion of Asian others throughout the modern age.⁵ Yellow peril rhetorics visualized China and the Orient not only at the farthest edge of the map but also as queered objects that embody distance and pure exteriority, whether through trade goods, linguistic script, or bodies. The relational construction of the Orient and the Occident cannot be separated from heteropatriarchal constructions of

gender in the time of colonial expansion. Rey Chow connects the construction of inscrutable China as pure surface with “traditional readings of women as passive, silent objects.”⁶ That Asia becomes disciplined as the West’s other, characterized as so different in its values, customs, languages, and beliefs, is epistemically entangled with Christian European ideas of gender and power. Inscrutability gives shape to discourses of hyper(hetero)sexualized Asian and Asian diasporic women, of emasculated and asexualized Asian American men, and, as Mel Chen writes, the trans discursive and embodied practices of Asian American gender through regimes of modern racialization.⁷

Recall how the bodies of Chinese people created a problem for legal and political epistemes in the nineteenth century, which in turn structured material problems for Chinese and other Asian lives. Early characterizations of inscrutability cohered through remote encounters with Chineseness and moved from a discursive reliance on “inscrutable China” to a broader racialization of Asian inscrutability, compounding through US legal histories wherein Chinese immigrants revealed the limits of the law’s existing racial categories. Early Asian immigrants to the United States were queerly unintelligible, as evidenced by the infamous Prerequisite Cases, where the inconsistent taxonomy of Asian bodies rendered immigrants legally inscrutable. This was reinscribed through their legal classification as “aliens ineligible for citizenship” and, in Mae Ngai’s vernacular, “alien citizens.”⁸ Chinese inscrutability set US legal precedent for the inscrutability of Asian immigrants writ large.⁹ The discourse of Chinese and Asian inscrutability made its way into US law as racial classification, systemically ensuring the foreign status of Asians by depriving them of the ability to claim citizenship. Karen Shimakawa shows how (white) US Americanness constructs itself in a subjective position through the reiterative abjection of Asianness, and that the provisional belonging of Asian Americans as Americans requires the jettisoning of one’s Asianness, most pointedly through the rehearsal of gender and sexual norms.¹⁰

These nineteenth-century legal policies were of a piece with yellow peril discourses that constructed the inscrutable Chinese as unreadable screens from an alternate time and space. Consider, for instance, the following description from the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1906: “Behind the slant eyes of the inscrutable yellow face one wonders what thoughts were flicking through the brain that has been forty-four centuries in the making, or with what subtle, shadowy Chinese contempt for all things Occidental the awakening infant was viewing the powwow of nations over his crib.”¹¹ The Chinese, described with “slant eyes” and “yellow face,” is constructed as a flat screen “behind” which lies the inscrutable thoughts of an ancient brain. The Chinese can be

understood as a queer figure of time here.¹² Suspiciously withholding, the inscrutable Chinese is infantilized in relation to an occidental viewer, implying an aberrant or ace sexuality. Note the paradoxical historicity of the inscrutable other as both “the awakening infant” and “forty-four centuries in the making,” suggesting a queer temporality embodied by the Chinese as both ancient and new to the modern era. This scene of inscrutability indexes a social encounter through a series of aesthetic judgments that construct the Chinese person as an epistemological limit, in relation to whose silence the occidental may speak. The voicelessness of the Chinese in this excerpt only ensures their inscrutability in relation to the enlightened occidental.¹³ Nevertheless, the relationship drawn between the person who judges the inscrutable as such (the “one [who] wonders”) and the inscrutable other (what lies “behind the slant eyes of the inscrutable yellow face”) acknowledges the existence of multiple, potentially incommensurable knowledge systems.

Contemporary US American public life, with its continued denial of Asian American culture, inherits and reiterates this queer construction of Asian foreignness. The Asian racialization of face masks in the spring of 2020, with the initial outbreak of COVID-19, offers a contemporary case study for the surface aesthetics of national threat. How otherwise to understand US American resistance to mask wearing during a pandemic, in the name of patriotism and freedom, simultaneous to a rise in documented accounts of anti-Asian violence? The face mask operates as a layer that, while filtering air particles, obscures the face and stalls speech. Reanimating language of inscrutability that conflates visual obfuscation with suspicion, silence, and docility, Cathy Park Hong writes: “The masks depersonalized their faces, making the stereotypically ‘inscrutable’ Asian face even more inscrutable, effacing even their age and gender, while also telegraphing that the Asian wearer was mute and therefore incapable of talking back if aggressed.”¹⁴ These persistent confluences of inscrutability with racialized anti-American threat have material consequences, as documented in the devastating, racialized coronavirus death toll as well as anti-Asian racism.¹⁵ Inscrutable surface as queer racial form can offer a way to understand the cultural (racialized, feminized, sexualized) coding of not only the face mask but also other head coverings (e.g., hijab, niqab, burqa), as the deployment of a long-standing construction of Asian/Eastern/Oriental styles as threatening surface. Further, we may connect racialized face masks to BDSM aesthetics, such that face covering is imagined as a queer racial threat. Such fear/fetish is premised on an Orientalist conflation of visual obfuscation with inaccessible interiority and suspicious passivity: the obscured face refusing speech and legibility, submitting to muteness.

These persistent racial aesthetics of Asian inscrutable surfaces are reproduced in and through modern epistemologies, including those that may claim no relation to Asia. When Asian form is disavowed as inscrutable surface, it often functions as a shorthand to reassert white or occidental mastery. Rey Chow's critique of Jacques Derrida's misreading brilliantly proves this point: that even the most celebrated critical thought in contemporary letters (deconstruction) relies on a fundamental Orientalism that "hallucinates China."¹⁶ Derrida misidentifies the Chinese language as ideographic, instead of phonetic, evacuating the script of sound. Deconstruction serves as another example of the continued legacy of Western modern thought based on the prescribed, silent inscrutability of China. Chow writes: "At the moment of cultural encounter the other is thus crushed against on the outer edge, as a mere exterior. This exterior, which in this case is literally expressed as an impenetrable (sur)face, nonetheless returns to me (the non-Chinese subject) as my enlightening, my enhanced understanding, my epistemological progress. While the Chinese are inscrutable, I remain lucid; their objectlike obscurity constitutes my subjectivity, my humanity."¹⁷ Derrida's productive construction of China as "the outer edge" repositions the cognizing "non-Chinese subject" as the knowing, enlightened ur-human. Chow's vital insight is that modern thought is so underpinned by the rehearsed casting of China as "mere exterior," vulnerable to another's judgment as to be "crushed against" itself, that critical theory is unspeakable without the axiom of Chinese inscrutability.¹⁸ As Chow writes, "'Inscrutable Chinese' is no longer simply the enigmatic exterior of the oriental but also *an entire language and culture reduced to (sur)face, image, and ideogram*."¹⁹

The abject inscrutability of the Chinese surface is precisely what renders Asian form queer. If, as Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez write, "queerness is best understood as a series of relations to form," then Asian racialization takes a queer form through reiterative surface relations to Western critical thought. Orientalism occasions queer forms of Asian diasporic relationality, through the unreadable surface, the masked face, the impenetrable script. Asian American cultural practices, in turn, experiment with queer form by structuring other relationalities and delimiting the epistemic bounds of modern thought. More, aesthetic modes of inscrutability queer common sense by disorienting the circuitry of Western knowledge. Inscrutability resonates with Amin, Musser, and Pérez's description of queer form "as a name for the range of formal, aesthetic, and sensuous strategies that make difference a little *less* knowable, visible, and digestible."²⁰

Rather, the poem surges with the speaker's heated desire to reach for him and to attend to the quiet intimacies of his life that survive him. To wish to feel connected in the face of historical obscurity, and to give that desire a shape, is productive of his queer-of-color possibility. The vital relationality of the poem glimmers through this minor queer recognition that eludes as it appears.

Inscrutability refers to a way of sensing and relating that operates beside the normativizing pathways of family and citizenship, and in theorizing inscrutability, I wish also to theorize the shame, loneliness, and despair that may come from such racial formation. I find it helpful to consider the queer form of inscrutability like that of the closet, as modern epistemes that rely on an interplay between exteriority and interiority.²² The figures of the inscrutable Asiatic and the closeted queer both obstruct a modern will to know through public spectacle, through "staying in" as opposed to "being out."²³ Jean Shin formulates the "foreign closet" for Asian Americans, as a need to "come out" as immigrant or Asian, where the Asian American is triangulated in a Black/white racial dichotomy as exceptional minority.²⁴ In these writings by Shin and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, curiously, queer and trans Asian Americans (as racially, sexually, and gender-closeted subjects) do not appear.²⁵ Their largely separate analysis of race and sexuality, however, must not foreclose the capacity to sense out their overlapping constituents. Often imagined as a shame chamber that the closeted wishes to break free from, the closet is constructed as a space that occasions the liberated subjectivity of others. But what if the closeted do not want to come out? In Nguyen's poem, the tacit space of the closet occasions queer kinship with his deceased uncle and his "roommate." To bring life to that space, as the poem does, is to reach for what may not be spoken or seen by the rest of the family—and is all the more precious for that reason. As Summer Kim Lee writes, opting to "stay in," as a tactical response to the "compulsory sociability" imposed upon Asian Americans, can remain a viable option that need not conflate asociality with antisociality.²⁶ What if inscrutable modes make certain worlds more livable and even proliferate social possibilities?

The Stakes of Obscured Internal Life

There are many ways to hold water
without being called a vase.

To drink all the history
until it is your only song.

—Franny Choi, "Orientalism (Part I)"

The queer aestheticization of Asian surface has significant impacts on the legibility of Asian American internal life. The construction of Asian exteriority obscures racial interiority, shaping first-person Asian experience and material life chances. In this book, I grapple not only with the pain and damage of inscrutable aesthetics but also with their world-making capacities. Here my thinking follows the scholarship of David Eng, Shinhee Han, and Anne Anlin Cheng, as well as the writings of scholars across fields, including Sara Ahmed, Jeffrey Santa Ana, erin Khuê Ninh, and Sianne Ngai, to consider the negative affects and ugly feelings of Asian racialization that build rather than foreclose cultural and social life. Attending to the emotional impacts of Asian racial formation attunes us to the Asian feminist, queer, and trans forms of care that exist alongside and through inscrutability. This book emphasizes surface *relations* because the negative affects of racial surfacing do not preclude Asian American sociality but open the social horizon to feminist, trans, and queer affinities. Where Orientalist discourses of the perpetual foreigner and post-racial liberal projects isolate in their mandated individualism, queer aesthetic practices of inscrutability are ardently relational and reaching for something else.

When Asian American life appears in mainstream media, racial tropes of surface inscrutability are often reinforced. Consider, for instance, a recent incident when a dean at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology described a Korean American candidate as “yet another textureless math grind” who “looked like a thousand other Korean kids.”²⁷ The indistinguishable, “textureless” surface imposed on this Asian American applicant, described without “American” claim, constructs not only a racialized surface exterior but also an unremarkable interior. Such evacuation of Asian American feeling reveals public neglect of Asian American life, care, and well-being. What is centered in these mainstream news items is not the particular lived experience of Asian Americans but a reiterated positioning of Asianness as social periphery, mute in the margins.

If Asia and Asian American history continue to be constructed as the outer limit, then Asian American psychic life bears the burden of holding histories that do not otherwise surface in national narratives. These lost histories and disavowed memories comprise a racialized loss formative of Asian American psychic life, one that reiterates spatial aesthetics of exteriority and interiority. As David Eng and Shinhee Han write, “These losses and voices are melancholically displaced from the external world into the internal world of the psyche.”²⁸ Asian American bodies, rendered as inscrutable surface, function to create the bodily surface as the compartmentalized container to

a private interior life. Asian American psychic health suffers from the public dismissal of Asian and Asian American histories. The losses brought on by external political and economic structures are internalized by Asian and Asian American people to constitute a racialized interiority founded in the absorption of such loss, trauma, and displaced history.

Depicted as ghostly, inconsequential, or forgotten, Asian American history, politics, and culture are often discounted as lacking real content. If there is no public recognition of Asian American history, politics, or culture, there can be no common ground on which violence and injustice, let alone grief, healing, and care, among Asian Americans are discussed. This lacuna occasions silent suffering in a neoliberal society. In an oft-cited line of the essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Sigmund Freud writes that "the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him."²⁹ As Eng and Han have written, the effect of the introjected lost "what" indexes the inscrutable factor as central not only to Asian racialization but to ego formation writ large. They write, "The pervasiveness of the model minority stereotype in our contemporary vocabulary works, then, as a melancholic mechanism facilitating the erasure and loss of repressed Asian American histories and identities. These histories and identities can return only as a type of ghostly presence."³⁰ Anne Anlin Cheng describes how the racialized American thus loses the self as a marker of legitimacy and instead feels the "installation of a scripted context of perception."³¹

Who benefits from this suffering? The evacuation and neglect of Asian and Asian diasporic lives have become normalized for the maintenance of global racial capitalism. Long-standing representations of Asians as silent exteriority are optimized in late capitalism to consolidate Asian tropes as ideal workers in racial hierarchies: self-regulating, cheap, in abundant supply, apolitical, eager to perform well. Whether model minority or migrant worker, the Asian American is often stereotyped as a robotic laborer whose social function revolves around economic efficiency, hard work, and professional success at all costs. The reality of complex Asian American feeling, of racial mourning and melancholia, is difficultly registered by a public gaze that depends on the exploitation and invisibilization of Asian labor (local, national, and transnational) in late capitalism. The racialization of transnational Asian flexible labor under neoliberalism, as studied by Aihwa Ong, is another form of hollow, disposable labor, evacuated of interior life relevant to public concern.³²

This is all to locate the stakes of *Surface Relations* in the psychic, emotional, social, and cultural endurance of people enfigured by Asian racialization. If Asianness is configured as ahistorical exteriority under Orientalist discourse, then, what is it to be produced as a racialized Asian subject? The production of the Oriental as an unknowable other creates a subjective quandary for those racialized through Orientalist surface aesthetics. What counter-discourses might we need to foster the psychic and somatic well-being of Asian Americans (whether or not they identify as such)?³³ How might a repurposed framework of Asian inscrutability allow for more supple self-understandings of race, gender, and sexuality?³⁴ Asian Americans lack collective language and frameworks for making sense of their own experiences as racialized beings, even as Asian Americans create and sustain vibrant social worlds.

The invisibilization of “Asian American” as a racial category is not something that only impacts Asian people. Inscrutability can be useful not only for analyzing the performative forms and force of Asian American racialization but also for interdisciplinary studies of race, gender, sexuality, and minoritarian aesthetics that may rely on the work of Asian American studies as an unspoken epistemic limit. The case studies in the following chapters focus primarily on artists of Chinese and Japanese ancestry; however, this is not to suggest that East Asians are the proper representatives of Asian America.³⁵ I write as the child of my single immigrant mother, who was born and raised in Taiwan, and as the grandchild of my maternal grandparents, whose arrival in San Francisco in the 1970s marked their second migration. It is from this positionality that I observe how East Asian racialization serves as a kind of racial limit not only for the reiterative consolidation of whiteness but also for coalition building among people of color (POC) in white-dominant spaces. Of course, not only Asian people are racialized as inscrutable, mysterious, and exotic. These social and political roles as the inscrutable other are textured and alchemized with other social conscriptions. Inscrutability can offer us a lithier way to pursue interdisciplinary studies of race and its dynamic formations while fighting white supremacist practices and parsing the particularities and tensions within racial experience.

Contemporary scholars need to grapple with the “internal contradiction” posited by the Asian American for a capacious sense of the construction of difference.³⁶ Often, the Asian American is conjured, if at all, as the triangulated third to a Black and white racial binary, either visualized as in solidarity with Black and brown populations in provisional POC status or in complicity with a

white monolith, thus reinforcing white supremacist hierarchies.³⁷ The Asian American racial position, as a shifting and contingent one, is relational, and its surface aesthetic is reiterated in theories of racial triangulation.³⁸ Asian Americans and immigrants can feel lost within discourses of “people of color,” thus reinforcing a sense of unbelonging, foreignness, and cultural obfuscation. Might we consider the modularity of Asian Americanness as premised on the queer formal construction of Asia as surface limit?

A more robust discourse of inscrutability, from a subjective position not only about negation but also about productive space making, allows for better access and recognition of care networks that already exist, as constitutive of Asian American and minoritarian cultures.³⁹ While it is true that Asian American psychic formation relies on an endemic relationship to loss, these legacies of trauma through war, poverty, displacement, racism, and misogyny have also produced their own intergenerational cultures, through scholarly, artistic, and literary engagements with trauma, loss, and healing. Inscrutability’s story does not end with the loss of legibility. In fact, loss is formative. Surface relations, as lived practices, may necessarily elude dominant optics but may be glimpsed in visual, literary, and performance art forms.

Performing Inscrutability as Reparative Knowing

To come into social life through surfaces is to figure queerly in a world premised on the exploration of depth. *Surface Relations* tends to the internal life and affective dimensions of Asian American racialization without overdetermining its content. Rather than attempt to penetrate a depth model of truth, this book notes the hetero-colonial tensions that arise from such a methodology, and instead focuses on Asian American appearance through this interaction of surface. How has the racial category “Asian American” itself taken on an inscrutable form: all exterior surface with ambiguous interior content? If we understand Asianness as that which is understood as pure screen for American projection, and “Asian American” as a still-questioned political signifier, then we must consider the productive work of inscrutable signs, known for emptiness, silence, or absence.

Asian inscrutability queers knowledge because it refuses the high valuation of modern thought as a kind of colonial capture. This book follows in the Indigenous, Black, anti-racist, feminist, and queer intellectual legacies that have destabilized modern foundations of knowledge by historicizing the violence exacted by Western thought. When queerness is informed by race

and systemic violence, as desires and cultures that persist in the face of policing and violence, then the stealth expressions of queer lifeworlds can be better glimpsed through the language of inscrutability. Within such traditions, the limits of knowledge need not be threatening. As Audra Simpson writes, “Rather than stops, or impediments to knowing, those limits may be expansive in their ethnographic nonrendering *and in what they do not tell us*.”⁴⁰ Inscrutability extends what Sedgwick posits as “practices of reparative knowing.”⁴¹ Reparative knowing practices of inscrutability can navigate forms of racial melancholia that Asian Americans face through persistent construction as hollow exteriority. An analytic of inscrutability can be understood as a kind of reparative surface reading, one that is attuned to the productive force of what can be sensed, including sensory negations in racial and queer forms.⁴²

I write toward a reparative knowing practice that is for the Asian American becoming-subject whose social neglect can seem to foreclose modes of relating to the self and others. To cruise not only for an external object of desire but for a desirous future self is queer work.⁴³ As Eng and Han’s theory of intersubjective becoming suggests, the search for oneself is not isolated from a search for a broader sense of belonging. The dearth of Asian American form in popular culture and national histories has necessitated a pedagogy of non-identitarian affinities and queer relations for those seeking Asian reflection. Animating Asian American sense is a queer form of minoritarian performance, because to sense out Asian forms within an American frame is necessarily to be in ambiguous, open, and reparative relation. The first chapter of this book will consider the vanishing point of Asian American visibility, particularly for Asian American women, as a productive horizon line in Asian American aesthetics. Relational aesthetics and embodied performance produce and share other ways of knowing and becoming.

Minoritarian performance of inscrutability is a mode of creating and inhabiting other worlds with one’s body in relation to other bodies, if for the most fleeting of moments. *Surface Relations* begins with this premise that inscrutable Asian racial form produces a surface of internal and external life and documents how the body unfixes this dyad through relational performance. Those embodied moments potentiate relief from the stultifying loneliness and self-doubt from shame and racial melancholia. The performing body critiques and subverts the binarized deployments of Asian American experience as either pure exteriority or interiority. These moments of minoritarian performance occasion other forms of connection and possibility

that exist from a vantage point that may not precisely be located but inhabited and moved through. The performing body can be said to experience, index, and ask after something through its movement as living form.

As queer and racial form, performances of inscrutability problematize the perceptibility of life. Made possible by the field of performance studies, this book's focus on aesthetic modes of inscrutability follows in a genealogy of José Esteban Muñoz's formulation of "the burden of liveness" for queers of color and minoritarian performers. Willful inscrutability in these pages follows Karen Shimakawa's theories of abject mimicry, that is, as an abject mime of the inscrutable other trope. As Shimakawa shows, Asianness has figured as the site of disgust and shame, that which should be abjected from the national body; moreover, the reiterative task of doing such racial abjection is labored on Asian Americans whose national belonging is contingent on successful performances of sexuality and nationality that mollify the perceived threat of Asianness. I name these two scholars and mentors here not only to credit their pivotal theories but also to index how Muñoz and Shimakawa together have mentored generations of performance scholars, such that to write "queer performance studies" or "minoritarian performance studies" as I almost do here feels redundant. This book is rooted, then, in the utopic part of the field that Muñoz and Shimakawa have tended, where the body's possibility and relational force are best understood through entangled rhetorics of performance, race, gender, sexuality, and nation. If "there are a (limited) number of preexisting ways of *reading* the abject Asian American body," then this book formulates the performance of inscrutability as a specific strategy of disidentification and mimetic abjection from the stereotype of Asian as inscrutable other.⁴⁴ Through performance methodology, the dynamic matter of the body, in its inscrutability and its imaginative interpretations and capacities, is the primary grounds of my readings. While performance seems to name that which disappears in its moment of appearance, its ephemerality does not delimit its perlocutionary effects. It is through performance's capacious temporality and liminality that inscrutability may be glimpsed. The body, whether conjured through written text or captured on film or labored through in performance art, troubles the abstraction that inscrutability could connote in its materiality, in its perception effects, and in its temporal and spatial specificities and decided critique of universalism. As Amin, Musser, and Pérez write, "To speak of the world-making capacity of aesthetic forms is not a willful act of naivety (though such acts of unknowing have their own value), but a way to keep critical practice vital and resist the downward pull of political surrender."⁴⁵

Minoritarian Performance Aesthetics of Obfuscation

Inscrutable surfacing negotiates the burden of liveness that performers of color are taxed with on and off theatrical stages. The stakes of liveness, the burden to perform as a legible subject for a dominant gaze, and the impossibility of a neutral context shape most any imaginable conversation we can have about history, temporality, and futurity for minoritarian life. José Esteban Muñoz intervenes in the “obstructive fetish” of liveness in the field of performance studies and writes: “Some performances are structured through historically embedded cultural mandates that the body of color, the queer body, the poor body, the woman’s body perform his or her existence for elite eyes. This performance is positioned within the dominant culture as a substitute for historical and political representation. Thus, performing beyond the channels of liveness and entering larger historical narratives seems especially important.”⁴⁶ Listen for the resonance of Muñoz’s words for Asian Americans, for whom “historical and political representation” remains tenuous, though some perform their “existence for elite eyes” as minorities offered provisional status in white-dominant institutions. Considering the charge of “negative personality” and evacuated interiority, Asian inscrutability can be said to index the burden of liveness as a burden of *liveliness*, of reassuring affective comportment that aligns one as a model minority who will not threaten dominant structures of liberal multicultural warmth and white fragility.⁴⁷ To focus on Asian American performance, as a vital part of a field of minoritarian performance, is to expand the study of compulsory liveliness for those who embody difference. Inscrutability is such a performance “beyond the channels of liveness” without forfeiting Asian American life. Through Muñoz’s influential phrasing of “minoritarian performance” and “queers of color,” this book resides in the relationship between these discursive formations and Asian American aesthetics.

Inscrutability troubles modern optics of and mandates for monolithic life and liveliness. Here I think with Mel Chen’s writing on animacies and Sianne Ngai’s writing on animatedness, with implications for queer and Asian temporalities. Asian and queer liveliness have symbolized twinned threats to the futurity of American modernity: Asianness as contagion and economic ruin through yellow perilism (as evidenced perennially through rhetorics of China as disease) and queerness as existential ruin through HIV/AIDS and non-heteronormative reproduction. Jasbir Puar’s scholarship on Muslim / Arab / Middle Eastern terrorist assemblages, through Orientalist discursive formations of queerness, brilliantly shows the volatile movements of these forms.

If Asian life has been that which might infect and end the white supremacist state's economic virility, then what do Asian racial forms of inscrutability teach us about the performance of other lifeworlds and temporalities?

Inscrutability is aligned with racial, gender, and sexual performatives that cohere around what I call *minoritarian aesthetics of obfuscation*.⁴⁸ Aesthetic modes of inscrutability describe senses of racial, feminist, and queer performance that route political and cultural life away from identitarian fixity and representation as the desirable political horizon. We may note the centrality of Asian American diasporic feminist and queer thinkers in constellating such a study, namely in Karen Shimakawa's mimetic abjection, Gayatri Gopinath's discussion of impossibility and queer-sighted vision, Homa King's reworking of Jean Laplanche's enigmatic signifier, and Karen Tongson's remote intimacies.⁴⁹ Through their writings, the abject, the impossible, the enigmatic, and the remote signal other affinity formations, other sensory modes, and other doings that render being and becoming otherwise imaginable.

I align my thinking with feminist and queer scholars whose work on history, memory, culture, and the body are navigated through aesthetics of obfuscation, deferral, withholding, and nonappearance. Engaging the writings of Édouard Glissant, Christina A. León articulates how opacity "instead invokes the visual through a resistance to the kind of gaze that desires mastery, simplicity, and knowability, and which all too often aligns with sexist and colonial desires."⁵⁰ I also learn from Tina Post's writings on deadpan, surface, and monochrome in Black expressive cultures; Sarah Stefana Smith's work on surface and camouflage in Black feminist visual arts; and Colleen Kim Daniher's writings on racial ambiguity and racial modulation as a crucial rethinking of mixed-race discursive contributions to contemporary racial aesthetics.⁵¹ I understand the writing of these scholars and *Surface Relations* to name and posit forth the urgency in swerving away from liberal impulses to cohere, to identify, in a word, to assimilate to existing terms of empathic life—all without forfeiting studies of "complex personhood" and historic dynamics of gendered racialization.⁵² These scholars work with anti-identitarian aesthetics of obfuscation that maintain a relationship with difference at the same time as they refuse to perform essentialized difference, working in the debt and genealogy of women-of-color thinkers who refused a separatist politics that would forsake their intersectional activist commitments.⁵³ I constellate these scholars with a rich genealogy of performance scholars, including Daphne Brooks, Joshua Chambers-Letson, Summer Kim Lee, Roy Pérez, Iván Ramos, Sandra Ruiz, and Shane Vogel, from whom I learn about modes of being, becoming, and belonging that cannot be neatly segregated into

analyses of gender, race, sexuality, or nation in a single axis but also cannot be encompassed through rhetorics of intersectionality or equality, as these spatial metaphors suggest the possibility of separating social axes into distinct or comparable specimens for study.

Within these minoritarian aesthetics is a need to consider the racialization of lively affect and its construction of social possibility. Inspired by Audra Simpson's work, Lilian Mengesha and Lakshmi Padmanabhan write, "Refusal asks us to reconsider the emotional, psychological, and embodied stakes of engagement—engaging in liberal state politics, engaging in representation, engaging in debate—because at the other end of that engagement for people of color, queer and trans bodies, is the punishment of excessiveness: we are too political, too sensitive, rude, loud, too argumentative. More succinctly, perhaps, we are often too much alive."⁵⁴ Yet, as we have seen through the racial construction of Asians as pure exteriority/interiority, these affective characterizations of excess can but often do not resonate for Asian American populations. In an American racial landscape, Asian Americans present a different kind of problem than being "too much alive" but rather not lively enough. The charge of not being lively, however, carries its own emotional, psychological, and political stakes, such that the very liveliness of Asian American culture and humanity is questioned. Asian Americans might be thought exceptional to racial excessiveness, such that to suggest a racial politics of inscrutability may stoke anxieties of Asian American apoliticality. So long as Asian Americans are formally conjured as hollow surfaces, Asian performativity is in a tense relation not only with white comportment but also with POC political affect.

Asian inscrutability disturbs the emotionality of political expression. While my task in the remaining pages of this book is to detail and think through the stakes of such an Asian American aesthetic theory, and how this racial form has occasioned an Asian American affective theory, I respect the caution that generations of scholars, from Mitsuye Yamada to Shireen Roshanravan, have voiced in noting the limitations of silence, invisibility, and infrapolitics.⁵⁵ This book does not build a "strong theory" for the inscrutability of Asian American and diasporic life.⁵⁶ More nearly, following Sedgwick, inscrutability can be understood as a weak theory in the service of minoritarian flourishing and queer speculative historiography.⁵⁷ Inscrutability warrants thought, as it allows for a more agile reckoning with Asian American subject formation that does not police Asian American life as always already needing to either defend its viability or apologize for existing. Asian American inscrutability is not only ever a reiteration of the status quo, of quiet passing, of model minority

respectability. As with most strategies or tools, there is no inherent political agenda to inscrutability.⁵⁸ I offer my intellectual energy to formulate inscrutability as an aesthetic strategy that artists have used to destabilize binaristic racial, gender, and sexual knowledge production. Especially for the political, cultural, and social life of Asian Americans, engaging with inscrutability offers vital paths forward.

Aesthetic Modes of Inscrutability

Inscrutability as a feminist and queer-of-color aesthetic strategy contributes to conversations in anti-identitarian critique, post-racial neoliberalism, and queer formalism by offering a framework for sensing Asianness not as a racial form consistent with multicultural logics of assimilation but as a form latent with stealth obfuscation, political critique, and innovative social forms. As that which cannot be searched into or understood, and which may evade dominant terms of liveness, I think through inscrutability in performances of invisibility, silence, unreliability, flatness, and distance. I have identified these modes through reading and viewing cultural productions that use these racialized and gendered tropes as aesthetic form. Each of these modes functions, to some degree, as both aesthetic dynamic and affective mood. Each names a minoritarian aesthetic and affect in contemporary Asian American expressive culture. The chapters make their way through different material surfaces: film, canvas, skin, page, photograph, and cassette tape.

The first three chapters of this book think through the Orientalist romance of Asian female negation, through aesthetic modes of invisibility, silence, and impenetrability, to consider how it is that Asian woman, trans, and nonbinary artists navigate the conventional, Orientalist modes of engaging with their bodies. From this introduction, the book tackles the trope of invisibility and disappearance in Asian American performance cultures, whether that be in the language of a lack of media representation or in the operatic suicides of Asian female tragic lovers. Chapter 1, “Invisibility and the Vanishing Point of Asian/American Visuality,” studies the trope of invisibility as one such mode whose productive force performs the nonappearance of Asian Americans as though a fact of contemporary life. Studying the aesthetic production of Asian invisibility allows us to contend with an American phenomenon where Asianness can only appear by disappearing. In this sense, the purported lack of representation of Asian Americans cannot be separated from misogynist and patriarchal nationalist forces that render feminine forms legible only

through hyper-hetero-sexualization and colonial conquest. Put another way, the chapter on invisibility thinks through the trope of Asian female suicide, as romanticized in the butterfly character, where invisibility does not name the absence of Asian women but rather its spectacularized and sexualized self-erasure to uphold white Euro-American state power. I turn to the artwork of Asian American and diasporic artists, including Denise Uyehara, who use the vanishing point as the grounds for desire and sexual pleasure.

I argue that to resign inscrutability only to a position of victimization is to concede too much, as though suffering is the proper criterion for minoritarian life. Indeed, what a study of inscrutability allows is an observation of the blur between aesthetic form and circulated affect of Asian racialization. In an ocularcentric world of liberalism, affect may be the only way in which aesthetics of inscrutability may be sensed. In chapter 2, “Silence and Parasitic Hospitality in the Works of Yoko Ono, Laurel Nakadate, and Emma Sulko-wicz,” I consider artists who mime these tropes as conventions that provide a framework for interpretation and critique. Ono, Nakadate, and Sulkowicz are not so much reifying a stereotype of Asian/American silence and hospitality in my reading so much as each artist is in their own way identifying pervasive discourses of silence and hospitality that set the stage for their work. By acknowledging and working with these socio-environmental givens, the artists can navigate market and everyday demands and strictures of legibility as well as potentiate other readings of embodied performance and practice of ethical encounter.

My third and fourth chapters consider artists’ invocation of Asian unreliability specifically through the materiality and penetrability of surface. In chapter 3, “Im/penetrability, Trans Figuration, and Unreliable Surfacing,” I consider the role of skin cutting in three contemporary novels, where the surface of the queer and/or trans Asian protagonist’s body is mutable. This changeability is also reflected in the protagonist’s unreliable narration; this trans and feminine, and transfeminine, unreliability has not only distressed white nation-building efforts but is also what has historically occasioned masculinist anxiety in Asian American studies. This discussion of surface unreliability is continued in chapter 4, “Flatness, Industriousness, and Laborious Flexibility,” through the installation work of Mika Tajima and the performance collective New Humans. I study how the inscrutability of Asiatic racial form is played with in Tajima’s repurposing of 1960s modular office furniture, allowing for an economic analysis of Asian unreliability in the rhetoric of flexibility—that is, flexible labor. By retooling the flat monochrome canvases

of cubicle furniture, as a kind of racialized modern form, Tajima critiques the optimization of economic efficiency in neoliberal capitalism.

In the last two chapters, the book turns toward a discussion of flatness and distance, both functioning as racialized affects and forms of inscrutability. For a recent example relevant to academic audiences, I write about the characterization of Asians and Asian Americans as having negative or low personality ratings in the admissions scandal at Harvard University, reminiscent of broader criticism of Asian/Americans as aliens or apathetic citizens. In chapter 5, “Distance, Negativity, and Slutty Sociality in Tseng Kwong Chi’s Performance Photographs,” I write about distance as racialized affect as well as artistic choice and material condition in performance artist Tseng Kwong Chi’s use of geographic and temporal distance throughout his ten-year self-portraiture/landscape series during the HIV/AIDS emergency of the 1980s. The chapter analyzes Tseng’s photographs to articulate a practice of slutty solidarity and queer coordination that is enacted through his performances of distance.

The book closes with “Something Is Missing,” a consideration of the meticulous documentation practices of Tehching Hsieh and Linda Montano’s famed year-long performance work, *Rope Piece*, in asking how inscrutability, via withholding, changes archiving practices. Taken together, these chapters offer a way to grapple with contemporary Asian racialization as something other than the missing identity, as a hollow and fading referent, in a list of races. Rather, attending to the productive force of this missing identification becomes the project of this book.

Surface Relations addresses the dangers of expectant self-sufficiency, diminishment, and invisibilization of Asian/American communities (commonly circulated through the model minority myth, persistent in academic institutions and elsewhere) as well as the need to collectivize comparative racialized and gendered feelings of inscrutability, urgent in a political climate that threatens both to disavow and to recruit difference—specifically Asian, feminine, and queer difference—under US neoliberal post-racial capitalism. I write this book with my students in mind, particularly Asian American, queer, and trans students who are working toward world-making in a reality that speaks in identity politics that often do not include them. With this book, I hope to offer conceptual frameworks for interpreting and practicing sociality otherwise, with critiques of the elevation of knowing over relating, and for extending curiosity for affective modes whose social potentials are currently dismissed. The broader significance of this project lies in the alternative world-making imagined, materialized, and made shareable through minoritarian aesthetic

encounter. While under modernism, the inscrutable has been marginalized historically, politically, and legally, inscrutable practices of performance and spectatorship index that which cannot be anticipated. As such, inscrutability as a concept carries with it not only the threat of demise but also the prospect of hope in the unknown.